

Yesterday, The New Paper reported on the story of a single mother with 10 children. In the father's absence, the eldest child, 18, is forced to become the man of the house. ZUL OTHMAN (zothman@sph.com.sg) finds out what it's like from someone who went through the same experience

Fatherless at 19, he became the father figure

His happy, carefree days of playing football and hanging out with friends ended 11 years ago, when he was 19.

It was 2003 and Mr Mohd Latiff Rahim's father had died of multiple gunshot wounds, following an argument with an ex-colleague.

Mr Latiff, now 31, remembers his father – 47-year-old Cisco Lance Corporal Rahim Othman – as a quiet person who spent his free time with his family.

But when he died, the teen, who was then a polytechnic student, was forced to be the man of the house.

With a faint chuckle, the father of one, who now heads his own digital marketing company, told The New Paper: "Apart from the sadness, I often asked myself if I could shoulder such a heavy burden of replacing my father.

"I didn't think I could do it, but I knew in my heart, I had to step up because it was my responsibility to do so."

Mr Rahim was shot three times at the SingTel Bukit Panjang Exchange at Woodlands Road on March 7, 2003.

An ex-colleague and former Cisco officer was sentenced to death on Oct 23 that same year.

The High Court found him guilty of shooting Mr Rahim twice in the stomach and once in the right thigh with the victim's revolver.

When his father died, Mr Latiff's main concern was his mother, Madam Siti Amnah Adong, then 44.

Then a part-time domestic worker, she became the family's sole breadwinner.

Mr Latiff said: "I tried my best to comfort my mother. She cried occasionally,



TOUGH TIMES: (Left) An old photo of Mr Mohd Latiff Rahim with his mother and sister, taken after the death of his father, (above) Mr Rahim Othman, a Cisco Officer, in 2003.

TNP AND ST FILE PHOTOS



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—Mr Mohd Latiff Rahim

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He also had to keep an eye on his three younger siblings – two brothers and a sister who were then aged between seven and 18 – making sure that they went to school.

He became "more serious", as he had new worries heaped onto his shoulders.

SURVIVAL

Such as how would the family survive on his mother's meagre salary.

And would his siblings accept him as a replacement for their father?

Said Mr Latiff: "Fortunately, my father's insurance policy and help from some organisations and relatives eased our family's financial strain.

"But I admit it was a hard role to

play (as a father figure), but whenever I faltered, I turned to religion to find strength."

Mr Latiff said it was hard to avoid Mr Rahim's "presence" at the family's five-room Bukit Batok flat, especially with photographs of the family's outings on display.

"My sister, who was then in Primary 1, was hit the hardest as she was my father's favourite," he added.

Being the only daughter, his sister – now 18 and in junior college – was simply too young to understand what had happened.

His two other brothers, aged 25 and 29, now work in a security company and for a hospital, respectively.

"Earlier on, it was hard to get my siblings to understand what I was doing," said Mr Latiff.

"Over time, they came to realise what I did – like lecturing them, for example – was for the good of the family."

Counsellors told TNP that while Mr Latiff's case is unique, they are also seeing more cases of the eldest child taking up the mantle of a missing parent – especially in this age when divorces are common.

Ms Illy Tahirah Mohd Rashid, a senior executive officer with the Family Services Unit of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), said the eldest child in a family often "steps up to assume the role of a missing parent".

This is because he or she feels it is his or her responsibility to do so.

For the last three years, Ms Tahirah, 25, has been a case worker working with families in financial difficulty.

Out of the 100 clients AMP helps each

year, an estimated 40 per cent are single parent families, she added.

"In most cases we encountered, the family bonds are much stronger and the eldest child will also be more protective of the mother, especially in difficult times," said Ms Tahirah.

FLIP SIDE

But there is a flip side, warned Singapore Children's Society's senior director of youth services Carol Balhetchet.

Some teenagers want "to be their age" despite family problems and "sometimes it gets confusing for a child when there are higher expectations placed on him or her by the family", said Dr Balhetchet.

When this happens, the tendency for them to rebel against their remaining parent is higher, she added.